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Upcoming Elections in Indonesia and the future of East Timor

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Mr. President, there are two issues of critical importance to the future of Indonesia, the region, and the international community which has interest in securing a stable and democratic future for Southeast Asia: the upcoming elections in Indonesia and the political status of East Timor. If the June national elections in Indonesia are determined to be free, fair and transparent, the ballot for East Timor's political future has a much better chance of being conducted under the same conditions. The U.S. and the international community must make a strong effort now to ensure that these conditions are established and upheld.

For the first time in forty-five years, Indonesians have a chance to participate in a free and fair election and to establish a government with popular support and legitimacy. For the first time in twenty-four years, the Indonesian government is willing to consider an East Timor that is independent of Indonesian rule, pending the decision of the East Timorese, themselves. Indonesia, indeed, stands at a cross-roads.

We must be sure that the U.S. and the international community stands there with it to guide Indonesia down the correct path. The path that leads to democracy and free-market economic growth. Not the one headed into chaos and economic downturn. It is clear that the stakes are high.

Indonesia boasts the fourth largest population, and is a crucial player in Asia, where American economic and political interests overlap. In 1996, the United States benefitted from some $3 billion in exports to Indonesia and American firms had invested over $5.1 billion in Indonesia's growing economy. The Asian financial crisis reversed this course of economic expansion, crippling Indonesia's economy and exposing the inherent weakness in Indonesia's political structure under the Suharto regime.

The resulting disintegration, which I saw first-hand during my trip to Indonesia in December, is overwhelming. Indonesia's GNP fell by fifteen percent in 1998, and is predicted to experience another decline this year. Unemployment stands at over 20 million, up from 8 million last May. Forty percent of Indonesia's 218 million people live below the poverty line. But, this is not the end of it.

Economic instability has exacerbated the already prevalent political and social tensions. Student protests, attacks on Chinese businessmen, conflicts between Ambonese Christians and Muslims, and paramilitary violence in East Timor is evident across the country. Separatist forces on Aceh, Irian Jaya and other islands in Indonesia's multi-ethnic archipelago are gaining sway as Timorese independence moves closer to reality. The Indonesian government must take strong and decisive steps *now* to reduce these tensions and build respect for the rule of law and human rights. This is necessary and crucial in order to create an atmosphere conducive to holding democratic elections and determining, peacefully, the future political status of East Timor.

I must, however, commend the actions that President Habibie has taken thus far to open the political process and set the stage for democratic elections in June. In February, 1999, he signed legislation that established guidelines and procedures for conducting national elections. Forty-eight parties are now registered to compete in the June election, as opposed to three in the Suharto era. The military's representation in the parliament has also been reduced. Seats will be allocated by proportional representation, rather than the winner take all strategy which favored the Golkar party.

I am pleased to cosponsor legislation introduced by Senator Robert Torricelli which supports these efforts of the Indonesian government to achieve a real and peaceful transition to democracy. This bill calls upon the government to make necessary preparations to ensure that free, fair and transparent national elections will occur in June and that there is a strong commitment to uphold the results of them. It also asks all parties involved in determining the status of East Timor to seek an equitable and workable resolution to this issue. I have cosponsored similar legislation in the past which affirmed the right of the East Timorese to have a referendum on self-determination, encouraged the Indonesian government to protect human rights and fundamental freedoms and urged the Indonesian political leaders to implement political and economic reforms. I will continue to support such efforts in the future.

The reforms that the Indonesian government has implemented – however encouraging – do not on their own guarantee free and fair elections, nor do they help to reduce the tensions related to East Timor's political status. Violence has been on the rise. The world has witnessed increased hostilities in recent months among groups that have cultural and political interest in what the future shape of East Timor will be. The Indonesian government has a responsibility to resolve these tensions. I believe it can begin by abandoning its plan to employ civilian militias to combat violence and dismantling existing militias, whose abuses are already heightening the potential for violence. The government must help the military find means for handling violent outbursts effectively, without abuse.

Allegations of the Indonesian military's direct involvement in committing human rights abuses and perpetuating violence led me to support a restriction on U.S. arms sales and International Military Education and Training (IMET) aid to Indonesia which was initiated by Congress in 1993. I was, and still am, concerned that the Indonesian armed forces might use U.S. arms, military training, and financial assistance to commit human rights violations against innocent civilians. It remains necessary to keep these restrictions in place until it is clear that the Indonesian military is committed to upholding democratic principles.

I am encouraged that the leaders of the Indonesian military, the pro-Indonesia militias and the pro-Independence rebels signed a peace agreement on April 21, 1999 that calls for an end to the violence and a laying down of arms. It also establishes a Peace and Stability Commission which may help to determine the process by which full disarmament can occur and the political status of East Timor can be determined. These are significant steps forward and I believe lay the groundwork for real stability and peace.

Mr. President, it must not stop there, however. The Indonesian government – with the

support and commitment of its military – must continue its dialogue with all competing factions, both those that support and those that oppose independence. Together, they must seek to resolve outstanding issues – such as disarmament and the question that will be asked on the ballot– in the most expeditious way possible. I am pleased that East Timor groups favoring independence from Indonesia have been included in recent discussions regarding the future political status of East Timor. It is important for all parties to be at the table since all parties must ultimately abide by the agreement if it is to be credible and enduring.

While the exact details of the tripartite negotiations that occurred last month between Indonesia, Portugal and the U.N. are not fully clear at this time, the world community will be watching closely when they are released. The August ballot is supposed to determine the political future of East Timor. Whether the East Timorese choose independence or continued unity with Indonesia, the voting process and the period following the vote must be free of violence and intimidation. The world community can play an active role in helping the Indonesian government see that this happens.

The Administration has pledged $30 million to assist Indonesia during its national election. However, I believe we, and others in the international community, should do more to make sure that sufficient funds are available both for a free and fair election to occur in June and to help the Indonesian government conduct a free and fair ballot for East Timor in August. The United Nations already has agreed to send a civilian police force to East Timor to monitor the vote. I believe this is a good first step. The U.N. presence should, though, be supplemented by international, non-governmental organizations, or equivalent Indonesian groups, which can help monitor and facilitate the ballot process.

The time is now for the U.S. and the international community to focus on Indonesia and East Timor. The national election for Indonesia is less than six weeks away and the ballot for East Timor is only about eight weeks after that. I believe, as one long involved in Southeast Asia, that it is important for those who have interest in the future stability of this region to start creating a positive atmosphere in which both of these events can occur.